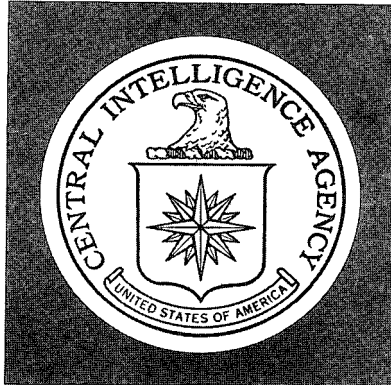


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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence Memorandum

The Czechoslovak-Soviet Struggle

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12 July 1968

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
12 July 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

The Czechoslovak-Soviet StruggleSummary

Soviet-Czech relations are again at a point of high tension. Moscow has publicly likened the situation in Czechoslovakia today to that which existed in Hungary just before the revolt there twelve years ago. The message, though implicit, was clear to all: Soviet troops which were moved into Czechoslovakia were placed there not for the "exercises" that provided a pretext, but as a token of Moscow's readiness to intervene militarily if worst came to worst. The Soviets have not been persuaded by Dubcek's repeated assurances that he can control the situation, and they have not seen the course of liberalization he has set in train slowed or changed. They have, therefore, been in no hurry to withdraw the forces they have positioned in his country.

For their part, the Czech leaders seem not to have lost their nerve. Indeed, their resolve seems to have stiffened under Soviet pressure. There is little choice for them but to stand their ground on the key issues. They seem to understand more clearly than their Soviet overlords that what has been set in motion in Czechoslovakia will not easily be reversed.

Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared jointly by the Office of Current Intelligence and the Office of Strategic Research and coordinated with the Office of National Estimates.

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1. There is no longer any pretense that the Soviet units that arrived in Czechoslovakia in mid-June for what the Czechs once hopefully billed as a standard communications exercise were departing gracefully and on time. It is now a matter of the Czechoslovaks "negotiating" their removal.

2. Some of the foreign forces have been withdrawn--the Czechoslovak minister of defense uses the figure 35 percent--but Soviet ground force elements in unknown numbers, as well as aircraft and tanks, remain. They may all go in the near future. On the other hand, the Russians may try to keep a military presence in Czechoslovakia until such time as they feel easier about political trends within the country. Or the units that participated in the June exercises may be pulled out, but only temporarily. The Soviet commander of the Warsaw Pact is said already to have proposed that another "exercise" be held in Czechoslovakia next month. The Russians may devise yet other forms of military pressure.

The Soviet View

3. While these questions remain, there can no longer be any question that the Warsaw Pact, to which Prague has repeatedly affirmed its allegiance, is one of Moscow's chosen instruments of leverage with the Czechoslovaks. Under its cover, the Soviets, in a real sense, have already intervened militarily in Czechoslovakia. It is also clear that, in their undulating course, Soviet-Czechoslovak relations are again at a point of high tension.

4. This has been the pattern of relations ever since the old order in Prague was overthrown in January, and unless the Czechoslovak regime lurches more sharply to the left or right than it has yet done, this pattern may persist for some time. Moscow must realize that it cannot turn the clock back in Czechoslovakia, even if it wanted to. But the Soviets want greater certainty than they now have that the new order in Prague is stabilizing, is master in its own house, and has the will and the way to force internal political ferment to subside.

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5. The Czechoslovaks have given some ground in the face of the political and military pressures applied by the Soviets and other like-minded Communist states, e.g., on relations with West Germany. On the nub issue--their right to chart their own internal course within a socialist framework--the Czechoslovaks have stood their ground. The Russians believe that they know best what the Czechs must do to stay within this socialist framework. They are far from sure that the Czechs, given their readiness to tamper with such sacred institutions as centralized party control, will manage to do so. They question the Dubcek regime's foresight and its capacity to steer a true course if not its intentions. They also see far worse elements than Dubcek in the wings--elements which, given their head, might put Czechoslovakia on a course that would take it right out of the Soviet orbit.

6. Moscow has little to show for the effort it has spent on Czechoslovakia since January. Prague's reiterated pledges of fidelity to the Soviet alliance have not allayed Soviet misgivings. The Russians would feel better if the Dubcek regime could demonstrate in concrete ways that it is committed to preserving one-party rule. They would breathe easier if they saw it do something to rein in the raucous Czech press. They might, especially, have more confidence if they thought that Dubcek was capable of ensuring the election of a "safe" central committee at the party congress forthcoming in the fall.

7. It must have occurred to some of the Soviet policy makers that if they press too hard they will force the Czechs, against their better judgment, further and further into defiance. Their actions might have the effect of undermining rather than strengthening the authority of the Communist Party, thus forcing Moscow closer to an unwelcome step--massive intervention. But if these questions have raised serious issues within the politburo, there is no good sign of it. Soviet policy is evidently to keep the pressure on. In devising ways to do this, they are proving inventive, if not subtle. Thus, at best, Prague probably faces a protracted test of will and nerve.

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The Czech Attitude

8. Moderate party chief Alexander Dubcek has been beset by critical problems at all levels--international, national, and local. Up to now he has exhibited a fair degree of both firmness and finesse in dealing with his most crucial foreign problem, the hostile attitudes of the Soviet and other ruling Communist parties. Lately, however, in the face of frequent Soviet provocation, the emphasis has shifted to firmness. So far, at least, he seems to have kept his nerve.

9. The key to Dubcek's relations with his Warsaw Pact allies is the differing interpretation each places on the concept of "Communist control." Dubcek's readiness to share power with non-Communists is looked upon by his neighbors as a dangerous revision of the basic Communist formula for maintaining power. Furthermore, Dubcek's promotion of a largely free press, of nationalism, of outspoken criticism, of the formation of nonparty political pressure groups, and of closer relations with the West, indicates to the alarmed orthodox Communists that the situation is slipping out of control. They clearly fear that such concepts will be contagious among their own populations.

10. Dubcek all along has been keenly aware that his destiny and Czechoslovakia's rest largely on his ability to convince the USSR that he can maintain the Communist Party in power and in control of developments in Czechoslovakia, and that he can keep the country basically aligned with the Soviet bloc. Within the context of his definitions, Dubcek has made many efforts to mollify the Soviets in order to buy time. But this has not been enough, and the Soviets seem now to be requiring actions, not words, as proof of his good intentions.

11. Dubcek has skillfully juggled his domestic problems, but he has been forced to juggle rather than to attack them head-on because nearly all his energies have been devoted to fending off outside pressures. Soviet opposition to the course of the Dubcek regime has encouraged party conservatives and leaders discredited along with former party boss and president Novotny to resist the reforms and to

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attempt to incite the population against the new leadership. Prior to the election on 30 March of President Svoboda, for example, Soviet personnel in Prague were openly in contact with conservative leaders, and East German diplomats and party personnel toured Slovakia in an attempt to drum up support for an orthodox candidate. At about the same time, leaflets calling for the workers to repudiate the Dubcek regime were found in Prague. They were traced to the Albanians by the Interior Ministry. East German agitators are still being sent into the country, and the conservatives are printing and distributing their own leaflets in Prague and other cities. The dissident hard-line faction has been so emboldened by the presence of Soviet troops on Czechoslovak soil that there has been talk of an attempted anti-Dubcek coup.

12. There are growing indications, including public opinion polls, that the Czechoslovak public supports Dubcek's leadership and welcomes his plans for change. One newspaper reported that it had received within a week of the publication of a liberal appeal for the ouster of conservative officials, 40,000 letters of support. The fact that such support has increased sharply in recent weeks probably results more from resentment of foreign pressures than from the things that Dubcek has done so far. Nationalism is on the rise and several organizations have pledged their support to Dubcek, even if it means resisting foreign intervention with arms.

13. The party, too, is rallying to the new leadership. Once the decision was made in May to convene a special party congress on 9 September, uncertainty began to be replaced by commitment at the lower party levels. Preparations for the congress are under way. They began with district meetings to select delegates to regional meetings where delegates to the congress would be chosen. Dubcek took 70 percent of the district meetings, and an overwhelming majority of delegates to the congress elected at the regional meetings are Dubcek supporters.

14. Despite the chaotic political situation, the liberal-moderate coalition in the leadership has moved to begin the reform programs promised in January. The steps taken so far are those most

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responsive to popular complaints, e.g., the abolition of censorship, the establishment of a National Front in which, politically speaking, the Communists are merely first among equals, and the rehabilitation of a number of prominent former political "criminals," some of whom were condemned with Soviet collusion. But these are precisely the steps that would most arouse concern, if not fear, among the Soviets and their East European followers.

15. Pressure from some Czechoslovak officials to reduce the military establishment, one of the strongest in Eastern Europe, has caused great concern to the Soviets, who have in recent years based their European military strategy on a strong "northern tier" that includes Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, and the USSR. With eight of its ten divisions combat-ready and with some 550 aircraft, mostly late-model interceptors and fighter bombers, the Czech forces are well trained and the best equipped of any in Eastern Europe.

16. Dubcek's determination to return Czechoslovakia to its prewar place as a "central European state" carries with it in the eyes of Czechoslovakia's Communist allies the connotation that Prague will no longer respect its commitments to them. Dubcek is sensitive to this issue, and he and his ministers have made countless pledges that their regime will not become involved in undertakings injurious to the real interests of the Communist half of Europe. Such protestations are ineffectual, however, when viewed against Prague's equivocation, for example, concerning the imposition on West Germans by the East Germans on 11 June of passport and visa requirements.

Dresden and After

17. The Czechoslovaks announced on 9 July that they have declined an invitation to make another trip to Canossa. They have told the Russians and their friends that differences between them can be discussed, but this will have to be done on something like even terms. They are not ready, in other words, to go through a re-enactment of the Dresden

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meeting in late March, when Czechoslovak leaders were summoned to appear before a panel of their peers--the Soviet, Polish, East German, Hungarian, and Bulgarian party and government chiefs--to explain and justify themselves and to be lectured on their obligations to the socialist commonwealth.

18. The latest stage in the troubled progress of Soviet-Czechoslovak relations--now at a point of heightened strain--began at Dresden. Enough is known of what happened there to make it clear why the Czechoslovaks do not want to have to run the gantlet again. Soviet actions since Dresden have demonstrated that general professions of good intentions on the part of the Czechoslovaks will, at most, earn them only a brief respite from Soviet pressures. Moscow has indicated that it will not be mollified unless the Dubcek regime will take the next step and clamp down on the liberals and progressives in Czechoslovakia. This Prague has been unwilling or unable to do.

19. On 9 and 10 April, the Soviet party central committee met to hear a report by General Secretary Brezhnev which, though never made public, unquestionably dwelt heavily on the problem of Czechoslovakia. Subsequently, other specific issues arose to reinforce Soviet anxiety. Charges in the Czechoslovak press of Soviet complicity in the death of Jan Masaryk were followed by insinuations that the Russians were deeply involved in the Czech blood purges of the early 1950s. The progressives in the Czech party were pressing the leadership to summon an extraordinary party congress to set the seal on the new course and, in electing a new central committee, to sweep the old guard from power once and for all. By early May, a new climax in Soviet-Czechoslovak relations was clearly building up. Dubcek traveled to Moscow for two days of talks with the Soviet leaders on 4 and 5 May, which left the Soviets more uneasy than ever. Hard on the heels of the departed Dubcek, on 8 May, the leaders of Moscow's more reliable allies--Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Bulgaria--arrived in the Soviet capital for a meeting that signaled the Soviet decision to deploy military forces along the Czechoslovak frontiers.

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The first of these demonstrative movements virtually coincided with the Eastern European leaders' trip to Moscow.

First Military Pressures

20. By 8 May, elements of the Soviet 31st Tank Division were already moving to the Soviet-Czechoslovak border while part of another Carpathian Military District (MD) unit, the 24th Motorized Rifle Division, began moving across southern Poland to the Krakow region near the Czechoslovak border. Polish and Soviet news agencies belatedly announced that these troops were participating in a "Warsaw Pact exercise."

21. Also in early May, the southern section of East Germany was put off limits to allied missions, and Soviet troops moved into the area. Southern East Germany is still restricted, and the expanded Soviet communications net set up in early May has been extended into western Czechoslovakia.

The Warsaw Pact Exercise in Czechoslovakia

22. Two further acts in the intricate maneuvering that culminated in the scheduling of a Warsaw Pact exercise in Czechoslovakia followed in mid-May with the dispatch to Czechoslovakia of Soviet Premier Kosygin and Defense Minister Grechko.

23. Whether Kosygin talked hard or soft to the Czechs is not known. The nature and effect of Grechko's persuasions were, however, clear. On his departure from the country, Prague finally acknowledged that a Warsaw Pact exercise would take place in Czechoslovakia in June. At this point, the Czechs, in the first of many references to the exercise which were to prove to be wishful thinking, labeled it a "staff-command" exercise. Czech Defense Minister Dzur at first said the maneuvers would be "fair-sized" but that they would not involve "big contingents" of troops. Initially, the Czechs said no foreign combat troops would participate in the exercise, only "communications and security troops" would enter Czechoslovakia. Prague later announced that some foreign combat troops would enter the country to serve as "marker units"--small numbers of troops representing larger units.

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24. The confusion and conflicting statements about the exercise made it very plain that the scheme was hastily concocted to provide a pretext under which at least token Soviet military forces could be introduced into Czechoslovakia.

25. The exercise began on 20 June, and on 23 June Prague announced that a Soviet tank unit had entered Czechoslovakia. Soviet units previously deployed from the Carpathian MD started moving in unknown numbers into central Czechoslovakia between 20-23 June. Five squadrons of jet fighters and reconnaissance aircraft from the Soviet tactical air force in Poland also deployed to Czechoslovak fields.

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26. Soviet participation in the actual exercise, however, was very limited--a fact that gives further evidence the Soviet troops were in the country primarily to establish a military presence.

27. It has not been possible to establish with any degree of assurance how many ground force units the Soviets actually moved into Czechoslovakia.

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The five Soviet squadrons--60 aircraft--of fighter and reconnaissance aircraft also are still in the country. Soviet tanks are reported to have been sighted, but there is no reliable evidence of their number. It is probably small. Similarly, some combat motorized infantry units have probably been moved in, but, again, in unknown numbers. Czech spokesmen, who have tried to minimize the number of Soviet combat troops, have spoken variously of from "several hundred" to "two regiments."

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28. As the Soviet reluctance to withdraw these troops attests, their significance lies more in their presence than in their number. They are clearly agents in a war of nerves. The force that is in Czechoslovakia, even if only a token force, is a reminder of Moscow's readiness to involve itself

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militarily and to intervene in force should bad go to worse, should Dubcek lose control, and should Czechs take to the streets after the fashion of Hungary 12 years ago.

The Next Phase

29. Moscow's latest message to Prague, an article in Pravda on 10 July, says clearly that Soviet patience has worn thin, but it is less than an ultimatum. Its statement that the USSR has confidence that the Czechoslovak Communist Party will be able to defeat the "reactionary antisocialist forces" is a left-handed exhortation to the Dubcek regime to act, not an endorsement. Having turned the political and military screws on the Czechoslovaks about as far as they will go without provoking open estrangement, the Soviets will now be looking to Prague to see if they have succeeded in eroding the Dubcek regime's will. Moscow's doubts about Dubcek's mettle have grown. They are obviously not committed to him personally and, if there were some practical alternative, Moscow might be inclined to do what it could to arrange his replacement. It is also clear that an attempt by the Soviets to interfere directly in the Czechoslovak party might only increase the present instability. The economic lever remains in reserve. Otherwise, the courses open to Moscow are unpalatable: either to acquiesce in the Czechoslovak experiment or to set up a new regime under Soviet guns.

30. Even if he should like to relieve Soviet pressures by drawing back from his promises, Dubcek is in no position to do so. His regime is committed to reform. Its executives are moving to implement the reform in every way they can. They are working to overcome conservative opposition by removing recalcitrants from every level, but by legal means. Initially apathetic, the population is being swept along with the regime, even though many are fearful of the economic reform that is yet to come. The most vocal elements in the population are organized and are supporting the changes. A serious retreat now from Czechoslovakia's new course would at least mean the political demise of Dubcek and the liberals, and, because it would necessarily be based on severe repressions, could conceivably lead to rebellion.

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31. Although the leadership has, up to now, been somewhat unsure of itself as regards the degree of firmness it should exhibit in the face of the Soviet challenge, within the past week it seems to have decided that it has no choice but to draw itself together, to stand firm and not to be intimidated.

32. There is little doubt that the Dubcek regime intends to stand its ground, for it really has no other choice. It is not disposed to push its differences with the Soviets to the point of military conflict, and has been conducting itself as if the Soviets were not there in force. But it has now crossed the bridge into new territory by publicly acknowledging Soviet military pressures; in so doing, it has embarked on a crucial phase of its fight for survival.

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